STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
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National Levee Safety and Dam Safety Programs

I am pleased that today two of our Subcommittees, the subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management and Subcommittee on Water Resources can jointly hold this important oversight hearing. This Committee has a long standing interest in the maintenance and safety of our nation's infrastructure.

The damage caused by Hurricane Katrina reinforced the importance of the safety of our Nation's water control infrastructure and the catastrophic consequences of the failure of that infrastructure in terms of the loss of human life as well as property damage. However other recent events including the failure in the Kaloko Dam in Kilauea, Kauai, in Hawaii a little more than a year ago resulting in the loss of several lives, point out the critical need for continued maintenance and safety programs for our nations dams and levees.

Today we will focus on two critical components of our nation's water control infrastructure, dams and levees.

Since the passage of the National Dam Safety Program Act in 1996, the program has improved the nation's dam safety. Dam inspections have increased significantly. There have been advances in the state-of-the-practice and user documentation; State training programs have been enhanced; research in the area of

improving dam safety has increased; and an information technology plan will be developed that will establish an information resource system to centralize national dam safety information. The Dam Safety Act of 2006, which was enacted last December, reauthorizes all of the programs established by the 1996 Act through 2011 and authorized an increase in funding.

Notwithstanding Congress' recent action, our committee intends to pursue a vigorous oversight of this program just as we are pursuing our oversight of FEMA as a whole. I look forward to hearing from today's witness as to how the dam safety program is working at the Federal, state and local level.

There has never been an inventory of the levees in this country. We lack an across-the-board sense of where levees are located, what condition they are in, or what resources are at risk if one should fail or be overtopped. Creating such an inventory of the structures, along with them and completing geotechnical assessments of them, will be lengthy and expensive. We must determine the ownership of the structure, its age, and the type of property the structure is protecting. Then we must determine a plan for how to secure dangerous levees and keep all levees in compliance with routine operation and maintenance requirements.

Hurricane Katrina is estimated to be the costliest and most deadly hurricane in our nation's history. Prior to 2005, the most costly hurricane to strike the U.S. was Hurricane Andrew, which made landfall in southern Florida in 1992 and was estimated to cost $25 billion in damages. NOAA estimates that Katrina wreaked

about $100 billion in damages. Most of these costs could be attributed to the flooding, and the resulting property damage, of large parts of New Orleans because of inadequate levees. A team of engineers studying the New Orleans flood protection after Katrina noted that, "New Orleans levees were built using standards developed when they were meant to protect farmland, not millions of people and their property."

Similar problems exist elsewhere in the country, including California. After several levee breaches last year during periods of high water, California did an assessment of levees. The State discovered 29 critical sites. In response, California then passed a $4.09 billion bond last fall to fund the repair and reconstruction of the dangerous levees. This response was quick and we hope effective in repairing California's levees and thus protecting its citizens.

I welcome our witnesses today and I am eager to hear their testimony on the status of this critical component of our Nation's infrastructure.